

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Fahrenheit 451 (henceforth *F451*) is a novel penned by Ray Bradbury as his response and critique to the social climate of the 1950s America. The novel itself narrates a dystopian future of America in which books become the most illegal commodities and must be destroyed in order to sustain the status quo. The story sets in an anti-intellectual world in which the protagonist, Guy Montag, stands up for what he believes in and challenges the prescribed hegemony of the world he lives in. Amis (as cited in Barret, 2011, p. 4) proclaims that the novel itself fundamentally deals with “the dehumanizing effects of modernity on human consciousness.” Indeed, the novel foreshadows the collapse of literacy, creativity, and at the same time, humanity. However, *F451* does not only offer a kind of social criticism. It also offers an insightful view to the effect of the oppression to the identity of the individuals living in that particular society.

Since the writer interested to examine the text as the historical and cultural product of a particular period, Cultural Materialism is seen as an appropriate way to approach the text. Harris (as cited in Elwell, 2013) argues that one of the basic assumptions about societies from the cultural materialism perspective is that the various parts of society are interconnected. It means that when a part of society changes, then the other parts should also change. This view implies that a culture’s hegemony is unstable and gradually changed. According to Gramsci (as cited in Goldberg, 2004), hegemony refers to “the success of the dominant classes in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that it is accepted by other classes as common sense” and those who offers any different perspectives will be shunned and marginalized from the society. Furthermore, Bressler (2007, p. 234) argues that hegemony is the “dominant

values, sense of right and wrong, and sense of personal self-worth” in a culture in which the people of that particular culture are expected to conform to the prescribed hegemony, even though it is against one’s personal belief. In other words, reality is socially constructed and the individuals in the society are being oppressed (conscious or unconsciously) in order to fit in. The dystopian America of *F451* is made possible because of the hegemony imposed in that particular society.

In the world of *F451*, the people failed to realize that they are actually being oppressed by the authorities because the suppression of books itself began as a self-censorship. Indeed, the people of *F451* gradually stop reading books by themselves and substitute them with mindless entertainment such as magazine, comic books, television, and so on. Therefore, when the authorities finally established a structure to reinforce the suppression of book, the majority of people did not complain. This phenomenon can be related to Young’s (1990) oppression theory in which she categorizes oppression into five ‘faces’ or forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. In contrary to the traditional view of oppression which is limited to “the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group” (Young, 1990, p. 40), Young argues that oppression can also happened in “awell-intentioned liberal society [that] place system-wide constraints on groups and limit their freedom” (Ibid). Furthermore, she points out that oppression can be the result of a few people’s choices or policies which results in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols in society. Eventually, these societal rules become “a restrictive structure of forces and barriers that immobilize and reduce a group or category of people” (Ibid). In other words, she considers oppression as a system that goes beyond a plain relation between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Since independent thought and freedom are strictly restricted in an oppressive regime, a question of identity is often brought up in dystopian literature. Generally, in dystopian literature, those who are oppressed cannot develop their identity well. In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) realm, for instance, the

proletarians are brainwashed in some ways that makes them indifferent to the current situation. This phenomenon can also be found in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) in which the citizens of the society regularly take *Soma*, a drug that gives them hallucination that can conceal their real feelings. This drug gives them a false sense of happiness that can distract them from questioning their life. In Bradbury's *F451* itself, the oppression which exists in the form of book burning aims to keep the people from individual thinking. In these three cases, the fact that the people are being oppressed by the government does not seem to register in their minds at all. As the result, the majority of these people are fully submitted to the higher authority and incapable of developing their own identity.

Although the majority of people are succumb to the status quo, there are also people who challenged the hegemony of the society and eventually questions their identity. Related to this matter, Hall (as cited in Grossberg, 1996, p. 89) states that identity is "always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences." In short, the latter means that throughout one's life, human will continuously going through some phases that allows him to evolve. In addition to this, Barker (2004, p. 93) points out that "identity is a cultural construction" because the material that forms identity are cultural in nature. The patterns found in these dystopian novels confirm the fluidity of identity; its capability to change over time, depending on the existing social and cultural contexts. This notion eventually leads the writer to question whether oppression can actually trigger and lead people to rebel and becomes an insurgent.

Departing from the explanation above, this study offers a new perspective in the study of Bradbury's *F451* by using a cultural materialism approach and focusing on the relational connection of the oppression and identity construction. In analysing the text, the writer employs Young's oppression theory (1990) and Hall's theory on identity as the framework of the study. Furthermore, this study not only extends the scope of the analysis that can be applied to this particular novel, but also offers a model for examining oppression and identity in literary text.

1.2 Questions of the Study

This study proposes two questions which will guide the writer in conducting it. The formulated questions are:

1. How is oppression portrayed in *Fahrenheit 451*?
2. How does this oppression affect the main protagonist's identity construction?

1.3 Aims of the Study

Based on the questions of the study, the aims of the study are:

1. To reveal the oppression experienced and observed by the society.
2. To find out how this oppression affect the main protagonist's identity construction.

To fulfil the aims of the study, cultural materialism approach is employed.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the portrayal of oppression in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), a story that narrates the life of a fireman named Guy Montag in a dystopian America. In Montag's world, the citizens of the society is oppressed in a way that the government makes them somewhat less human and much easier to control. One of the oppressing acts that can be found in *F451* world is the book burning. As mentioned before, book is considered as the most illegal commodities in the society and should be burnt along with the house in which they are hidden.

In addition to the topic of oppression, this study also highlights the identity construction of Montag, the main protagonist of the story. All his life, Montag never questions the act of destruction. Until one day, a series of events lead him to scrutinize his so-called peaceful life. Throughout the novel, as Montag continues to explore the depth of his life and struggle to escape the claw of the oppressive regime, he gradually evolves into a totally different person.

The text itself will be approached from a cultural materialism perspective and analysed by using Young's oppression theory (1990) and Hall's identity theory.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The results of this study are expected to offer a new perspective in the study of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, which is using the cultural materialism approach to examine the interrelationship between oppression and identity construction of the protagonist. More specifically, this study is expected not only to extend the scope of the analysis that can be applied to this particular novel, but also offers a model for examining oppression and identity in literary text.

1.6 Methodology

The present study is a textual analysis of a dystopian novel entitled *Fahrenheit 451* written by Ray Bradbury. In the analysis, the writer applies a context-oriented analysis, an approach which "do not regard literary texts as self-contained, independent works of art but try to put them within a larger context" (Klarer, 1998, p. 94). More specifically, the approach taken by the writer is a cultural materialism approach. According to Harris (as cited in Elwell, 2013), one of the basic tenets of cultural materialism is the assumption that society is a system of interrelated parts. It means that when a part of society changes, then the other parts should also change. The approach is relevant to the study since the writer aims to find out how the main protagonist's identity construction is affected by the oppression that he observes from his interaction with other characters and things around him.

Since the study focuses on the oppression experienced in the society, the writer employs Young's (1990) theory on oppression in which she categorizes oppression into five forms: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. This theory supports the writer's assumption that the

oppression portrayed in the text does not necessarily rely on actual physical enforcement or coercive acts.

This study also aims to reveal the causal relationship between the oppression and identity construction. Relating to that, Hall's view on identity also supports the analysis. Hall (as cited in Grossberg, 1996, p. 89) comments that "identities are always relational and incomplete, in process." In the same vein, Barker (2004, p. 94) adds that identity is not an entity but rather "an emotionally charged description" which is flexible and changeable, depending on the social and cultural context exists. In other words, it is socially constructed. The writer will further rely on this identity theory to analyse the evolving character.

In addition to that, selected literature such as theoretical books, encyclopaedias, and journal articles are also used as points of reference to support the analysis.

1.7 Clarification of the Key Terms

In order to avoid misunderstanding of the concepts used in the research, there are some terms that are needed to be clarified. Those terms are: oppression, identity, and cultural materialism.

The first one is *oppression*, an act of oppressing in which the oppressed people "suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feeling" (Young, 1990, p. 40). It implies that oppression does not only exist in a totalitarian society, but can also be seen in a well-intentioned liberal society that place a system-wide constraints on groups and limit their freedom.

The second term is *identity*. Hall (as cited in Fearon, 1999, p. 5) points out that identity is a kind of ambivalent point of thought and being. He adds that it is "always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences" (as cited in Grossberg, 1996, p. 89). To put it in a nutshell,

identity is an ongoing process which results in qualities that makes oneself different from others.

Last but not least, *cultural materialism*. According to Elwell (2013), cultural materialism is “a systems theory that attempts to account for the origin, maintenance, and change of societies.” Moreover, Williams (as cited in Milner, 2002, p. 20) explained that cultural materialism is “a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices.” In short, cultural materialism deals with human socio-cultural systems and aims to seek the explanation for both similarities and differences of thought and behaviour in human.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This study consists of five chapters which are: introduction; literature review; research methodology; findings and discussion; conclusion and suggestions. The first chapter focuses on the introduction to the study which provides information on the background of the study, questions of the study, purposes of the study, scope of the study, significance of the study, methodology, clarification of key terms, and organization of the study. The second chapter covers the theoretical discussions of oppression, identity, and cultural materialism. In addition, the historical and social context of *F451* and related previous studies are also presented. The next one is the third chapter which consists of brief discussion on the object and context of the study. It also presents the research design and procedure. Chapter four will be an analysis of oppression as portrayed in *F451* and how it is related to the identity construction of the protagonist. In addition to that, the fourth chapter will also critically discusses possible meaning(s) of the findings by using the cultural materialism approach. Conclusion is given in the fifth chapter to summarize the issue discussed throughout the present study. In addition to that, the chapter also provides suggestions for further research and related study. Last but not least, the appendix offers table of the textual evidences

gathered from *F451* which the writer draw on throughout the study to discuss and analyse the topic of discussion.